

Beyond Employment to Decent Work: Exploring the Role of Sustainable HRM in Workplace Social Inclusion and Employee Well-being

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Abstract

Working conditions are now recognised as having meaning beyond employment status, in terms of fairness, inclusion, security, employee voice, and well-being. In this context, the present study aims to analyse the link between Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM), Social Inclusion in the workplace, employee well-being, and their perceptions of decent work. The research design employed was quantitative and cross sectional, and it was carried out by means of a structured questionnaire with 100 respondents. The questionnaire contained five-point response scales to measure Sustainable HRM, social inclusion, employee well-being and decent work. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, internal consistency analysis, Pearson correlation, simple linear regression, Welch independent-samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA in the Microsoft Excel program. The mean scores of the four constructs were fairly positive, with scores between 3.71 (Sustainable HRM) and 3.92 (Decent work). Statistically significant positive relationships were found between Sustainable HRM and social inclusion ($r = 0.481$, $p < 0.001$), employee well-being ($r = 0.501$, $p < 0.001$), and decent work ($r = 0.430$, $p < 0.001$) using Pearson correlations. Regression models also showed that the variance of social inclusion could be accounted for by 23.1% of the variance of Sustainable HRM, 25.1% of employee well-being, and 18.5% of decent work. All Cronbach's alpha values, however, did not reach the conventional .70 level for the constructs and should therefore be taken with a grain of salt and need to be refined for future use. The results corroborate the idea that HR practices that focus on the employees' side of the equation are linked to positive employee experiences in the workplace and that there is a need for more robust validations of measurements and samples that are larger and more diverse.

Keywords: Sustainable HRM; decent work; workplace social inclusion; employee well-being; workplace sustainability; human resource management.

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Introduction

What employment means has shifted from just having a job to the quality of the employment relationship and the context in which work is carried out. The focus on decent work is emerging as an area of growing interest, in which dignity, equity, security, rights, development and acceptable working conditions are at the centre of the employment relationship. The recent research literature further confirms that decent work is not just a macro-level labour market goal, but it also has employee-level outcomes including employee well-being, engagement and career outcomes (Wan and Cao, 2022; Su et al., 2023).

In conjunction with this general notion of sustainability, Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) has emerged. Sustainable HRM does not focus on the short-term implications of HRM for organisations, but rather on the social, human and organisational impacts in the longer term. The field in recent years has been growing in size but has not yet been conceptually unified, and there is great interest in how sustainable HRM practices relate to employee outcomes (Qamar, Afshan and Rana, 2024; Gomes, 2025). Empirical studies also suggest that Sustainable HRM practices could be effective in enhancing employee resilience and work engagement, which represents a potential pathway for how sustainable HR practices can influence positive employee outcomes (Lu et al., 2023).

Social inclusion in the workplace is another key aspect of socially sustainable employment. Inclusion relates to whether staff feel that they are respected, valued, accepted, and able to be part of the organisation in a meaningful way. The key tenets of inclusion research today emphasize equal treatment, self-expression, participation in decision-making, and psychological safety and support in employees' experiences of inclusion (Nguyen, 2023; Randel, 2025). Research has also shown that in the Indian context, diversity alone does not guarantee inclusion; there is a strong link among the three as well, which can be influenced by the conditions of the organisation (Jaiswal, Dyaram and Khatri, 2022).

One of the other outcomes of HRM that can be used to measure the social dimension is employee well-being. A systematic review by Qamar, Afshan and Rana (2024) confirmed that Sustainable HRM predicts well-being at work, and Bhoir and Sinha (2024) determined that employee-oriented HR practices are important in contemporary well-being research. Further recent research has also found associations between inclusion and emotional exhaustion, as well as decent work and psychological wellbeing, emphasizing the need to pay attention to the work environment and its impact on working life (Humphrey et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2026).

Although these have been studied, Sustainable HRM, workplace inclusion, well-being, and decent work are often studied in isolation from each other. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by analysing the relationship between these in a single employee survey. The study examines if there is a relationship between reporting higher levels of sustainable HRM practices

and reporting higher levels of social inclusion in the workplace, higher levels of wellbeing and more positive perceptions of decent work amongst employees. Overall, however, the study provides empirical evidence to an emerging field of Sustainable HRM, and the relationships between the variables measured across the cross-section remain relatively conservative given the circumstances.

1.1 Research aim and objectives

The aim of the study is to explore the role of Sustainable HRM in workplace social inclusion and employee well-being, while examining its association with perceptions of decent work.

The objectives are to:

- (1) To assess employees' perceptions of Sustainable HRM;
- (2) To examine the relationship between Sustainable HRM and workplace social inclusion;
- (3) To examine the relationship between Sustainable HRM and employee well-being; and
- (4) To examine the relationship between Sustainable HRM and decent work.

1.2 Hypotheses

Based on the literature, four testable expectations were developed: H1: Sustainable HRM is positively associated with workplace social inclusion.

H2: Sustainable HRM is positively associated with employee well-being.

H3: Sustainable HRM is positively associated with decent work.

H4: Workplace social inclusion is positively associated with employee well-being.

These hypotheses are treated as associations rather than causal claims because the study uses a cross-sectional design.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Sustainable HRM and the social dimension of sustainability

Sustainable HRM may be defined as a form of HRM that aims at balancing organisational goals with the long-term interests and welfare of employees and other stakeholders. The modern literature highlights that Sustainable HRM is not one ready-made concept that can be easily operationalized but rather a collection of various approaches that relate HR practices to social, economic and environmental sustainability. The authors of the study (2024) examined 134 studies and observed that empirical studies are still in a fragmented state and that more sophisticated, robust models are required to be associated with employee well-being in the context of Sustainable HRM. Gomes (2025) also defines Sustainable HRM as a rapidly emerging topic and notes that employees' attitudes and outcomes have taken on greater significance.

The social dimension is especially relevant for the present study, as many of the Sustainable HRM practices have a significant impact on the daily lives of employees. Training and development can build competences, participation can boost employee voice, fair rewards can create organisational justice, health and safety can safeguard physical

well-being, and work-life balance can dampen work and non-work tensions. Lu et al. (2023) empirically show that sustainable HRM practices can help empower employees and lead to employee resilience and work engagement, meaning that employee-centred HR practices can be seen as workplace resources, instead of just administrative tools.

Sustainable HRM and workplace social inclusion

Inclusion at work is a topic that focuses on what it feels like to be included, and yet still able to participate and express one's identity. Nguyen (2023) demonstrates that workplace inclusion has been theorized in various ways and that the organisational consequences of workplace inclusion are far-reaching and not limited to traditional approaches to diversity. Similarly, Randel (2025) conceptualises inclusion as a process with inputs, intervening conditions, and outcomes of wellbeing and commitment. Crandell et al. (2024) identified four common elements linking employees' perceptions of inclusion to their actual treatment: Equal treatment, being integrated into decision-making, expressing oneself authentically, and feeling safe and supported. These are dimensions similar to the social dimension of Sustainable HRM. A sustainable HR system that treats employees fairly, invites participation, values employee interests, and promotes employee development can put the conditions in the organisation for employee inclusion. The results of the studies conducted in India also suggest that the organisational environment could be a hindrance to the positive link between diversity and inclusion and wellbeing, which further underscores the significance of the organisational context in shaping the lived experiences of people with disabilities (Jaiswal, Dyaram and Khatri, 2022).

2.2 Sustainable HRM and employee well-being

A key result of sustainable people management is the well-being of employees. Bhoir and Sinha (2024) argue that employee well-being is a new wave in HRM research, with HR practices being crucial in maintaining employee health and workplace operations. In line with the above, the authors of the systematic review by Qamar, Afshan and Rana (2024) also conclude that Sustainable HRM has been linked with wellbeing at work, but the literature is still in need of further and stronger theoretical and empirical integration.

It makes sense from a mechanism perspective, as sustainable HR practices may impact employee resources. Development opportunities can provide enhanced competence; participation can provide enhanced autonomy and voice; safe working conditions can provide reduced physical risk; fair rewards can provide enhanced perceptions of justice; and work-life practices can provide reduced role conflict. Moreover, Lu et al. (2023) demonstrate the positive relationship between resilience and work engagement through S-HRM. The linkage between decent work and employee well-being has been found at the level of decent work: at the individual level, decent work was found to be positively associated with employee well-being by Wan and Cao (2022); at the meta-analysis level, there was a medium association between decent work and well-being from 30 studies and 16,026 participants (Su et al., 2023).

2.3 Sustainable HRM, decent work and employee outcomes

A good lens for assessing the sustainability of employment from the employee's point of view is decent work. New studies show that fair reward, safe work conditions, reasonable working hours, health measures, values alignment, and development opportunities are important components of decent work. Geradine and McWha-Hermann (2024) suggest that HR managers play an important part in making decent work operational,

especially in terms of fair reward and people-management practices. Decent work dimensions as job resources related to work engagement have also been explored in India (Kashyap, Nakra and Arora, 2022), further underscoring the importance of HRM to quality of employment.

The connection will thus be expected to go beyond one-off HR initiatives. When employees believe their employers invest in their growth, treat them well, create a safe workplace, take into consideration their interests, and promote a balance in their work-life, they may also feel that their working conditions are decent. Thus, the third hypothesis can be formulated as: Sustainable HRM has a positive relationship with perceptions of decent work.

There is also some evidence in the literature that links inclusion and wellbeing. Inclusion can lead to psychological safety, social acceptance, and access to participation for employees, whereas exclusion can lead to strain or reduced workplace support. Empirical studies in the recent past have also suggested that workplace inclusion is related to reduced emotional exhaustion (Humphrey et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and participants

This study used a quantitative descriptive survey design. The primary data were obtained from a structured questionnaire, and a total of 100 complete responses were analysed. All responses were voluntary, and a consent statement was given before respondents filled out the questionnaire. The design was chosen due to the study's aim to quantify the perceptions of employees and statistically analyse the association between the variables of the study: Sustainable HRM, social inclusion, employee well-being and decent work.

3.2 Instrument and measurement

This questionnaire comprised 24 questions grouped into four sections. Demographic and employment characteristics were collected in Section 1. Eight items were included in Section 2 on Sustainable HRM (Q7 – Q14). Section 3 comprised four social inclusion items (Q15-Q18) and three employee wellbeing items (Q19-Q21). Three indicators of decent work/overall workplace experience (Q22 – Q24) were included in Section 4. The substantive items were assessed on a five-point scale from low to high, ranging from negative to positive perceptions. The scores were computed as the mean of the items of the construct.

3.3 Data analysis

Data were coded and analysed with the help of Microsoft Excel. The descriptive analyses were frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, median, minimum and maximum scores, skewness and kurtosis. Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency. Pearson product-moment correlation was employed to explore the relationships between construct scores. Simple linear regression models estimated the explanatory contribution of Sustainable HRM to social inclusion, employee well-being, and decent work. Welch independent-samples t-tests tested for differences between different genders, and one-way ANOVA was used to test for differences between organisation types. The significance level used for the analysis was p value < 5% (p < 0.05).

3.4 Ethical and methodological considerations

The survey employed informed consent and voluntary participation with confidential handling of responses. The data are cross-sectional and no causal claims are made. Further, the relatively small sample size and non-probability selection of respondents make generalising the results to the target population limited. These restrictions are taken into account when making inferences from the results.

4. Results

4.1 Respondent profile

A sample of 100 people was used. There was a relatively equal gender distribution, with 53% male and 45% female, while 2% opted out of identifying their sex. The largest age group was 46–55 years (35%), followed by 26–35

years (32%) and 36–45 years (26%); only 4% were aged 18–25 and 3% were aged 56 or above. The educational qualifications were also relatively high, with 48% with a postgraduate degree, 29% with an undergraduate degree, and 17% with a doctoral degree. 41% reported 11-15 years and 29% reported 6-10 years of experience in employment. The sample comprised 57% permanent (full-time) employees and 26% temporary (contract) employees. Organisation types included private sector (38%), public sector (36%), non-profit/NGO (24%) and other (2%).

Figure 1. Gender distribution of respondents.

4.2 Descriptive statistics

Table 1: Construct-level descriptive statistics

Construct	N	Mean	SD	Media n	Min	Max
Sustainable HRM	100	3.710	0.500	3.750	2.250	4.500
Social Inclusion	100	3.805	0.591	3.750	1.750	5.000
Employee Well-being	100	3.920	0.740	4.000	1.667	5.000
Decent Work	100	3.783	0.694	4.000	1.000	5.000

The mean scores for all four constructs were above the middle score on the five-point response scales. Sustainable HRM had a mean of 3.71 (SD = 0.500), social inclusion 3.81 (SD = 0.591), employee well-being 3.92 (SD = 0.740), and decent work 3.78 (SD = 0.694). Employee well-being was thus most positively rated, with Sustainable HRM being the least. The values of the skewness range from negative to negative for all constructs, suggesting that the responses were generally at the high end of the scale. Interestingly, employee well-being (–1.125) and decent work (–1.317) had the strongest negative skews, implying a higher degree of favourable responses.

The maximum mean was found in satisfaction with the working environment (Q20; M = 4.01), followed by satisfaction with training and professional development opportunities (Q8; M = 3.98) and satisfaction with physical and psychological well-being (Q21; M = 4.00) at the item level. The lowest mean was for long-term employee well-being orientation of HR practices (M = 3.52), while fair treatment regardless of background (Q10; M = 3.56) was the second lowest. Overall, this pattern indicates that respondents were more positive towards their work experience and development opportunities, and had a less positive perception of systemic fairness and the long-term orientation of HR.

4.3 Reliability analysis

Table 2: Internal consistency reliability

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Sustainable HRM	Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14	0.495
Social Inclusion	Q15, Q16, Q17, Q18	0.279
Employee Wellbeing	Q19, Q20, Q21	0.364
Decent Work	Q22_Score, Q23_Score, Q24_Score	0.567

All constructs: Sustainable HRM $\alpha = .495$; social inclusion $\alpha = .279$; employee well-being $\alpha = .364$; decent work $\alpha = .567$ were below the

.70 threshold commonly used for the Cronbach's alpha index. Care should be taken with these results. The results, accordingly, must be seen as preliminary, not definitive evidence of the validity of a psychometrically validated measurement model. Low alpha values could be due to the relatively small number of items within some constructs, to a mixture of item content in some constructs, and to the fact that the questionnaire was developed for this particular study and was not adopted as a whole from one validated scale. The instrument is ideally suited for submission to a journal in the instance that it can be refined and retested with a bigger sample.

4.4 Correlation analysis

Table 3: Pearson correlation matrix

variable	Sustainable HRM	Social Inclusion	Employee Well-being	Decent Work
Social Inclusion	0.481	1.000	0.326	0.278
Employee Well-being	0.501	0.326	1.000	0.340
Decent Work	0.430	0.278	0.340	1.000

The results of the correlation analysis showed that all four constructs had positive and statistically significant correlations. Sustainable HRM was moderately positively correlated with social inclusion ($r = .481$, $p <$

$.001$), employee well-being ($r = .501$, $p < .001$) and decent work ($r = .430$, $p < .001$). The correlation between Sustainable HRM and employee well-being was the greatest of all the relationships in the matrix. There were positive correlations found between social inclusion and employee well-being ($r = .326$, $p < .001$) and decent work ($r = .278$, $p = .005$). Decent work was also positively associated with the employee's well-being ($r = .340$, $p < .001$).

The pattern supports all four proposed hypotheses on the level of bivariate association. But crucially, correlation does not imply causality. The findings show that employees' perceptions of more positive Sustainable HRM practices are also associated with perceptions of more positive experiences in relation to inclusion,

well-being, and decent work, but the study design does not allow us to establish whether Sustainable HRM leads to these experiences, or whether these experiences lead to more positive perceptions of Sustainable HRM.

4.5 Regression analysis

Table 4: Simple regression models predicting workplace outcomes

The regression findings corroborate the findings based on the correlations. Sustainable HRM was found to be significantly predictive of social inclusion ($R^2 = .231$, $B = .568$, $t = 5.429$, $p < .001$), explaining 23.1% of the variance in social inclusion. Sustainable HRM also significantly predicted employee well-being ($RZ = .251$, $B = .741$, $t = 5.727$, $p < .001$), accounting for 25.1% of the variance. For decent work, Sustainable HRM was again a significant positive predictor ($RZ = .185$, $B = .596$, $t = 4.713$, $p < .001$), explaining 18.5% of the variance.

The overall outcome, combining the outcome dimensions of this study, yielded $RZ = .405$; B

$= .635$, $p < .001$. Overall, the models indicate that a relationship in a statistical sense between Sustainable HRM and the employee-centred outcomes in this study is meaningful. The highest percentage of variance accounted for across the individual outcomes was found for employee well-being. However, these are only explanatory correlations in the sample and do not constitute causal relationships.

4.6 Gender and organisation-type differences

There were no statistically significant gender differences for the independent-samples t-tests conducted for Sustainable HRM ($p = .162$), social inclusion ($p = .924$), employee well-being ($p = .602$), decent work ($p = .552$), or overall outcome ($p = .561$) using Welch's t-test. The mean differences were small; for instance, the Sustainable HRM mean was 0.78, and the employee well-being mean was 0.97 for males and 0.64 and 0.97 for females, respectively.

Table 5. Welch t-tests by gender

One-way ANOVA also indicated no statistically significant differences across the four organisation types for Sustainable HRM ($F = 1.569$, $p = .202$), social inclusion ($F = 1.426$, $p = .240$), employee well-being ($F = 1.527$, $p = .212$), decent work ($F = .776$, $p = .510$), or the overall outcome ($F = 1.211$, $p = .310$). While the differences between the descriptive data were observable as reported by non-profit/NGO respondents (highest mean for Sustainable HRM (3.84) and Social inclusion (4.00)), these should not be interpreted as statistically significant sector effects.

5. Discussion

The results confirm the general hypothesis of a positive relationship between Sustainable HRM and the employee experience. The mean scores for all constructs were relatively favourable except for employee well-being, which had the highest mean score of (3.92). More importantly, Sustainable HRM was shown to be significantly related to all three main outcomes: social inclusion, employee well-being, and decent work. This is similar to the recent literature in sustainable HRM, which increasingly has employee well-being and socially responsible people management as central components of sustainability, not only HR outcomes (Qamar, Afshan and Rana, 2024; Lu et al., 2023).

5.1 Sustainable HRM and social inclusion

For H1, the Sustainable HRM and social inclusion variables are moderately correlated ($r = .481$, $p < .001$), and the regression result ($RZ = .231$) is significant. This aligns with current research that redefines inclusion as fair treatment, participation, authentic expression, psychological safety, and support (Crandell et al., 2024). A number of these dimensions are directly expressed in the Sustainable HRM items in the current survey, mainly the items related to fair treatment, employee participation, and consideration of employee interests.

The extra information is provided in the item level results. The results indicated that the level of respect and value at work was relatively high ($M=3.93$), as was the ability to express opinions without fear of unfair treatment ($M=3.85$). The findings indicated that inclusion is not just about being equal in numbers, but it's also about recognition and voice between people. The mean for lower levels of fair treatment across all groups (3.56) suggests that there is also a need to further increase perceptions of fair treatment. This is crucial as it has been demonstrated in India that the context of the organisation can influence whether diversity becomes real inclusion and well-being (Jaiswal, Dyaram and Khatri, 2022).

5.2 Sustainable HRM and employee well-being

H2 was most strongly supported of the three bivariate relationships between Sustainable HRM and the outcome measure with $r = .501$ and $p < .001$, accounting for 25.1% of the variance in employee well-being. The finding corroborates the systematic review evidence found by Qamar, Afshan, and Rana (2024), which concludes that SHPRM is related to wellbeing at work. It also supports Lu et al. (2023), who identified that HRM that is sustainable can increase the resilience and engagement of employees.

This relationship is confirmed by the descriptive evidence. The mean of the responses for satisfaction with their working environment and maintaining physical and psychological wellbeing were 4.01 and 4.00, respectively. Such relatively high scores suggest that positive perceptions of day-to-day working conditions exist alongside positive perceptions of sustainable HR practices. But the crosssectional design has alternative explanations. Staff who are more well-being may, for instance, have a more favourable outlook of their organisations. The current findings do not provide evidence of causality, just association.

Sustainable HRM and decent work

This was also a positive and significant relationship between Sustainable HRM and decent work ($r = .430$, $p < .001$) and supported H3. The extent of the variance in perceptions of decent work could be explained by SRL. The finding is conceptually congruent with current research that has associated HRM responsibilities with the actual delivery of decent work, which includes fair reward, security, health, values, and development opportunities (Geradine and McWha-Hermann, 2024). The findings also align with evidence linking decent work and positive employee outcomes and wellbeing (Wan and Cao, 2022; Su et al., 2023).

The indicators for decent work used in the present study yielded a mean of 3.78. The mean answers for the items relating to decent and fair employment conditions and the organisation's approach to employee welfare and inclusion were 3.84 and 3.85 respectively. The results show mostly positive perceptions, but with an average rating of 3.66 for overall working conditions. This gap indicates that perceptions of organisational welfare and justice might be somewhat more positive than perceptions of working conditions overall.

5.3 Social inclusion and employee well-being

Results of H4 are supported by the positive relationship between social inclusion and employee well-being ($r = .326$, $p < .001$). The Sustainable HRM–well-being association was weaker, but the

result is still statistically significant and consistent with research stating that inclusion is a resource that can help safeguard the well-being of employees. For example, Humphrey et al. (2024) reported that emotional exhaustion was negatively related to workplace inclusion. This is therefore consistent with previous findings that inclusion and wellbeing are linked, from a larger group of employees.

5.4 Non-significant demographic differences

It is also instructive that there were no significant gender or organisation-type differences found.

Within this sample, it implies that perceptions of Sustainable HRM, inclusion and well-being, and decent work are not differentiated strongly by these demographic and organisational categories. The ANOVA results should, however, be taken with a pinch of salt as the organisation-type groups were not even, especially the organisation-type Other (only 2 respondents). To establish whether there are differences across sectors or across the different age groups, larger and more balanced samples would be necessary.

5.5 Measurement implications

Obviously, the internal consistency of the scales is an important methodological issue. Cronbach's alpha was between .279 (social inclusion) and .567 (decent work). It doesn't negate the observed correlations, but it does mean it isn't a perfect illustration of the item groups as being highly reliable latent constructs. Social inclusion and employee well-being are particularly relevant issues. For future studies, standard multi-item instruments should be used; the instrument should be examined for item-level reliability, and item structure should be tested for validation, preferably through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, on an even larger sample. The present study is thus most suitably considered as an exploratory empirical contribution that can help find some interesting relationships for further testing.

Conclusion

Secondary analysis of primary survey data, which included 100 respondents, was used for this study to explore the relationship between Sustainable HRM and workplace social inclusion, employee well-being and decent work. Generally, employee perceptions are favourable on the four constructs, with the highest mean score being with regard to employee well-being (3.92), followed by social inclusion (3.81), decent work (3.78), and Sustainable HRM (3.71). All of the inferential findings were positively associated. Sustainable HRM had a significant correlation with social inclusion ($r = .481$), employee well-being ($r = .501$), and decent work ($r = .430$), and social inclusion also had a significant correlation with employee wellbeing ($r = .326$).

The findings corroborate the main argument of this study that Sustainable HRM is relevant to the transition from employment towards more inclusive and well-being-oriented decent work. From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that HR policies that include aspects of development opportunities, fair treatment, employee participation, health and safety, or work-life balance and attention to employee interests might be connected to more positive employee experiences. This will drive home the benefits of embracing employee welfare and inclusion in sustainable people management for HR practitioners.

The study nevertheless has important limitations. The sample size was 100, the research was cross-sectional, and the sampling approach limits generalisability. The use of self-reported perceptions also creates the possibility of common-method effects. Most importantly, internal consistency was below conventional thresholds for all constructs. These limitations mean that the findings should not be interpreted as causal or as definitive validation of the questionnaire.

Future research should therefore replicate the study using larger, more diverse and preferably probability-based samples. Researchers should also employ validated scales, test measurement validity and examine mediating or moderating mechanisms such as employee voice, organisational support, psychological safety and organisational justice. Longitudinal or multisource designs could further establish temporal relationships. Overall, the present findings provide preliminary empirical support for an integrated view of Sustainable HRM, social inclusion, employee well-being and decent work, while identifying clear opportunities for stronger measurement and more rigorous future research.

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